

British and Irish Students at the International Lenin School, Moscow, 1926-37. (includes SCW people)

archive.org

John Halstead and Barry Mc Loughlin, *Saothar*

Roughly 150 members of the CPGB or the Young Communist League (YCL) attended the ILS(1) in Moscow between 1926 and 1937. A further dozen or so British communists, often ILS graduates, underwent special training as temporary lecturers (aspiranty), or were dispatched to the school a second time as instructors. (2)

Established in accordance with the motions passed by the 5th Comintern Congress (July-August 1924) to "bolshewise" the world movement, that is, rid it of "social democratic remnants", the ILS opened its doors in summer 1926 at Vorovsky Street 25a in central Moscow.(3) Courses on offer lasted from one to three years, with special sections organised by the Communist Youth International (KIM). The student's sojourn in the Soviet Union also included practical work in factories (praktika), military training and long summer holidays. In the initial phase, British and Irish students were taught together with colleagues from the USA and Canada in school sector "D", but a separate sector "E" was founded in 1933 for British, Irish, Australian and New Zealand cadres. The Scottish veteran communist Tom Bell held the post of chairman in Sector E until November 1936, shortly before the last students in his charge departed for home.

(4) A final category of British-born skilled workers engaged by Soviet factory management comprised young men who had either been rejected out of hand as unsuitable for admittance to the ILS, or who had either completed the course or were suspended from classes and sent to a factory in the provinces to show their "proletarian" worth. Abraham Fagin was commandeered to a job in Gorky,(5) and the ILS graduates of a three-year course, Max Halff (1928-31) and Alan Eaglesham (1930-33), were dispatched to Odessa and the Moscow factory no. 24, respectively. (6)

Halff, from a poverty-stricken Russo-Jewish background in Manchester, had been deported from Britain in 1928 and is said to have become a "Comintern agent" in later years.(7) Eaglesham, by contrast, was the son of a Scottish clergyman and a graduate of Edinburgh University. After interrupting further studies for lack of funds, he travelled to Australia and New Zealand in the years 1927 to 1929, joined the Comintern sections there and found work as a labourer, miner and trade union official. (8)

A meeting organised between the school leadership and the English-speaking delegates to the 7th Congress of the Comintern in August 1935 produced several examples of mentality differences in regard to the proper function of the ILS. Tom Bell, in presenting the official school viewpoint, criticised the student selection process conducted by the CPGB and complained that the greatest problem with the British students was "their inclination to individualism, workers' aristocracy and bourgeois culture". (9) Peter Kerrigan of the CPGB, an alumnus of the ILS, noted the tendency of school graduates to isolate themselves from Party members on the resumption of political work at home. His remarks were underlined by examples given by Pollitt and Idris Cox. Pat Devine (Communist Party of Ireland) and Pollitt also attacked the concept of "Party loyalty" imparted at the school and were at a loss to explain why comrades negatively characterised by the ILS directorate had been, and were again proving themselves to be, promising functionaries on the home front.(10) The sharp response given to the criticism on the part of the British ILS teacher Robinson that the ILS leadership did not take enough cognisance of the low educational level of the persons the CPGB delegated to the school, was telling: the knowledge the British students had on arrival was "non-Marxist and had to be liquidated". (11)

A perennial complaint from the Russian side concerned the failure of the CPGB to take up its full allotment

of school places. This was partially due to the fact that the school gave preference to bachelors. A miserable allowance was offered to their dependants in Britain, despite Pollitt's many entreaties to ILS Director Klavdiia Kirsanova on this matter over the years. (12)

Harry Pollitt had to admit, however, that lower Party bodies were reluctant to release scarce cadres for a sojourn at the ILS, stating that "the districts have a rotten attitude to whole question". (13) The relationship between King Street and the ILS ended on a sour note. Pollitt had gone to considerable trouble to find CPGB members suitable for the school and was financing the stay of prospective ILS trainees from New Zealand, Australia and South Africa in London when he was officially informed by the Comintern in March 1936 that no more students were to be dispatched to Moscow: the present course was nearly over, there was a lack of teachers at the ILS and the CPGB should set up its own central Party school. (14) Pollitt described the sudden decision as "extremely disappointing after long delay [on] your part". (15)

During the Spanish Civil War forms of cadre-control evident in ILS instruction were replicated within the International Brigades. Of the eleven Battalion Political Commissars in the 57th (British) Battalion of the 15th Brigade, nine, if not all, had been sent to the ILS or had worked in the Comintern bureaucracy in Moscow.(16) The corresponding figure for the thirteen company commissars was three. (17) None of the military commanders from Britain or Ireland, either at battalion (fourteen) or company (thirty-seven) level, however, had an ILS background. (18)

In regard to those elected to the Central Committee of the CPGB, which had between thirty and forty members during the 1930s and 1940s, at least sixteen of the total were ILS alumni. With twenty percent, ex-Lenin School students were most heavily represented on that body in the period 1929-35. Only two (Peter Kerrigan and Will Paynter) were still members after the 21st Congress held in 1949. Most ILS trainees, if they remained in the CPGB, were to be found in the intermediate ranks of functionaries, especially area and city organisers.

Clandestine Operatives

The employment of CPGB members by clandestine Soviet organisations can be partially explained by the sojourn of such cadres at the ILS or working for the Russian bodies already mentioned in London. These educational experiences or employment patterns laid the basis for bonds of trust between those who became secret operatives and their Moscow superiors in the Liaison Service (OMS) of ECCI, in Soviet Military Intelligence (GRU) or in the foreign department of the state security service within the secret police OGPU-NKVD. It is hardly surprising, then, that the sojourn of some British communists in Moscow became the initial phase of recruitment for clandestine Soviet operations in the West.

Douglas Springhall and Percy Glading, the two most prominent CPGB officials sentenced to a prison term by a British court for espionage on behalf of the USSR, are cases in point. Springhall, "dismissed in disgrace" from the Royal Navy at the age of nineteen in 1920 because of his political activities, was a member of the YCL Executive two years later. He attended Comintern congresses in Moscow in the mid-1920s, was involved in "anti-military work" for the CPGB in 1925 and was seconded by the YCL to work in the Organisational Department of the Central Committee of the VKP/b during 1926.(19) Under the Party name "Dave Miller" Springhall attended a "long" course at the ILS between 1929 and 1931 and was elected a member of the CPGB Central Committee on his return to Britain. His trustworthiness was further underlined in 1936, when Springhall was the first Briton to be appointed Political Commissar of the 15th International Brigade in Spain.(20) He is reputed to have held Red Army officer rank there. (21) His good standing with the Soviet apparat was also evident in a further tour of duty in Moscow in 1938-39, this time as CPGB representative to ECCI. Springhall was National Organiser of the CPGB when arrested for passing on Air Ministry secrets to the Soviets in 1943.(22)

King Street expelled him on his conviction, and Douglas Hyde asserts that Springhall had been consistently warned by his comrades to desist from espionage activities on account of his prominent position in the Party hierarchy. (23) Springhall had also attempted to infiltrate the wartime espionage and sabotage organisation Special Operations Executive (SOE), (24) and succeeded in recruiting former comrades-in-arms from Spain for Soviet military intelligence. These GRU operatives later became part of the Swiss branch of the "Red Orchestra". (25) Springhall ignored the most elementary rules of security, specifically the necessity to separate his CPGB agenda from any directives he received from his Russian spy-masters, thus compromising King Street. His cavalier attitude was not a solitary example, for Bob Stewart, another prominent CPGB functionary, acted as contact-man between the Cambridge spy-ring and Moscow in the years 1937-40, when there was no espionage officer (rezident) at the London Embassy of the USSR and MI5 had placed a hidden microphone in CPGB headquarters. (26)

A similar disregard for clearly demarcating Party and clandestine agendas is also evident in the case of Percy Glading, the leader of the Woolwich Arsenal spy ring. He was allowed by his NKVD handler Arnold Deutsch to continue his CPGB activities with "caution", and to retain his post as British secretary to the Comintern front organisation League Against Imperialism until March 1937, less than a year before his arrest. As a former member of the Central Committee of the CPGB (1927-29) dismissed from Woolwich Arsenal in 1928, Glading was too well-known for sub rosa activities. The British Secret Service had opened a file on him as early as 1922, suspected him of spying from 1927 onwards and knew that he had attended the Lenin School in 1929-30.(27) Any "successes" achieved by MI5 against Soviet spy-rings in Britain before 1945 can be attributed to its placing of "moles" within the CPGB or observing communist activists.

Other British-born intelligence operatives of the Soviet Union are relatively unknown, or the evidence for such recruitment is fragmentary. There is the case of Eric Verney, for instance, who joined the CPGB from the Hampstead branch of the Independent Labour Party in 1920 and took up employment with the Russian Trade Delegation shortly afterwards. Verney soon headed that organisation's ciphers department and was transferred to the Istanbul office in 1922. After his party biography had been confirmed by the British ECCI representative Bob Stewart, Verney was appointed to the central apparatus of the secret police in Moscow in autumn 1923.(28) Details of his further career are still a secret. (29)

Following the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941, many CPGB members, Douglas Hyde alleges, passed on military or industrial secrets to the Soviet Embassy via the Party to help the Soviet war effort. (30) MI5 uncovered a GRU network of British Spanish War veterans (31) and tried to cultivate members of another GRU ring known as the "Gibbons-Robson Group". (32) This appellation is a reference to Danny Gibbons, an ex-officer of the British Battalion in Spain and the brother of John Gibbons, Daily Worker correspondent in Moscow during World War II, and in Rumania in the post-war years. (33) The contacts of John Gibbons (b. 1905) to Soviet institutions were of long standing, going back to his direction of the "anti-militaristic" department in the CPGB Central Committee in the late 1920s, and continuing in Moscow where he was accepted for a KIM course ("John Ross") at the Lenin School in 1930. (34) By 1938 John Gibbons was head of the English Section of the international broadcasting service (Inoradio) of Radio Moscow, supervising the work of his wife V. Harvey, the Deptford communist Dora Hart and Oliver Stoker, who was not a CPGB member but had undergone training at an electro-technical school in Moscow. (35) Maggie Jordan, another ILS alumna (1927-30), was a "senior correspondent" at Inoradio between 1933 and 1939. (36)

Apart from Soviet espionage proper (OGPU-NKVD) or the Red Army's intelligence service abroad (GRU), the liaison department (OMS) of the Communist International also needed staff who possessed British passports and could be employed as couriers,(37) radio-operators or wireless-technicians. OMS, originally the "Secret Department" of ECCI set up in August 1920, sent, in the early phase of its existence, written

material to Moscow via the local Soviet Trade Delegation, and telegrams through the apparatus of the People's Commissariat of International Affairs (NKID). According to an agreement signed in April 1923, OMS was allowed to use the couriers of the Soviet foreign espionage service, thereby affording the latter a detailed knowledge of Comintern affairs and enabling it to recruit promising OMS personnel for spying missions. (38) By the mid-1930s, when British recruits, as the radio traffic between Moscow and King Street reveals, were being actively sought, OMS had three "bases" just outside the Russian capital - Podlipki (passport forgery workshop), the radio broadcasting centre at Rostokino and a school near Pushkino, where the wife of OMS director Abramov-Mirov taught the English-speakers. The foreign stations (punkty) of OMS were also conduits for NKVD or GRU operations, in particular the transfer of cash and documents from one country to another. During the 1930s the OMS network had to be re-organised several times, as important punkty were wound up for political reasons (Berlin in 1933, Vienna in 1938). (39)

The increased need for English-speaking OMS technicians was a consequence of the re-organisation of Comintern structures after the 7th Congress (1935): the practice of sending ECCI emissaries to supervise recalcitrant communist parties was largely dispensed with, and the single national sections of the Communist International gained more autonomy and could now communicate directly with Moscow. (40)

The earliest known British candidates for OMS activities were three ILS graduates who had attained excellent final marks at the end of their course in 1933. (41) Those "put at the disposal of OMS" were George Coyle, Elisabeth Stephens and John Goodram. They were deemed "suitable for further work". (42) Coyle subsequently taught as a temporary lecturer at the ILS, (43) and was recommended, along with Hymie Lee, for "special work" when the last British students left in spring 1937. (44) (44) The OMS career (as wireless operator-technician) of John Murray started in February 1934 in Moscow. Murray had joined the CPGB in 1922, enlisted in the Royal Corps of Signals two years later and left Army service in 1933. He was dismissed from ECCI employment in December 1937 "for lack of trust", the common formula to denote those who had not passed the rigorous Party purge criteria during the Great Terror. He later worked in the State Pedagogical Institute for Foreign Languages in Moscow. (45) Known in Moscow as "George Hannah", Murray was arrested after the Second World War, but survived the Gulag and died in Moscow.

The number of students at the OMS school was set at 50 to 75 for 1935, (46) and the CPGB was requested in October 1935 to send details of how it was preparing its student allotment. (47) The CPGB sent three cadres for the OMS course in January 1936, (48) one of whom was Edward Smith, a twenty year-old carpenter from London. In July 1938, Smith, by now fluent in German and Russian, turned up at the reception centre of the International Brigades in Figueras. (49)

Harry Pollitt had naturally no influence over what his nominees for an OMS course did once they had completed training. He was embarrassed and angry when the arrest of an OMS operative in Copenhagen in 1935 led to the identification of British colleagues who had assisted in the establishment of the Danish station the previous year. Scotland Yard detectives called at the home of a female British OMS employee, prompting Pollitt to remark bitterly in a telegram to Abramov-Mirov: "Why can such questions be carried out without my knowledge?" (50)

Soviet Russia was pre-occupied with Britain as a world power and the principal centre of imperialism; its interest in British communism, save as a valuable cadre reserve or information source, was perfunctory. With this in mind and considering that British passport-holders enjoyed relative ease of passage over State borders, the recruitment of CPGB cadres for secret Soviet operations was a logical development. (51)

The CPGB, for its part, displayed a limited interest in exploiting the possibilities of Comintern co-operation. The schooling programs offered to British cadres in Moscow were criticised by the students and their leaders at home. A critical attitude to Stalinist ideological norms was also shared by some

English-speakers employed by internationalist bodies in the Russian capital.

FOOTNOTES

(1) For an article on Comintern schools as reflected in Russian archival documents, see Leonid G. Babichenko, "Die Kaderschulung der Komintern", Hermann Weber et al. (eds), *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* 1993 (Berlin 1993), pp.37-59. [Back to the text](#)

(2) All students and staff at the ILS were compelled to use pseudonyms. Thanks to the assistance of Monty Johnstone, and by drawing on RGASPI files, roughly eighty percent of the British student pseudonyms have been deciphered to date. Further biographical data on the ILS intake from Great Britain can be found in the following works: Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (1927-1941, London 1985; 1941-1951, London 1997); Harry Wicks, *Keeping my Head. Memoirs of a British Bolshevik* (London 1992); Stuart McIntyre, *Little Moscows. Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain* (London 1980); Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London 1984); Barry McLoughlin, "Proletarian Academics or Party Functionaries? Irish Communists at the International Lenin School, Moscow, 1927-1937", *Saothar* (Yearbook of the Irish Labour History Society) 22(1997), pp.63-79; Francis King and George Matthews (eds), *About Turn. The British Communist Party and the Second World War. The Verbatim Record of the Central Committee Meetings of 25 September and 2-3 October 1939* (London 1990). [Back to the text](#)

(3) For the background to the school opening, see RGASPI, 495/164/500:50-54. [Back to the text](#)

(4) RGASPI, 531/1/1/69:1; 531/1/134:10; 531/1/237:86. Bell, known at the school as "Grey", was confirmed as sector leader by Pollitt in June 1934. See PRO, HW 17/16, Radio Telegram London-Moscow, 26 June 1934. Monty Johnstone kindly gave me copies of the intercepted CPGB-Comintern traffic recently released by the Public Records Office London. For a discussion on the material, see *Guardian*, 10 October 1997. Bell later used his school lecture notes for his *Short History of the British party* (1937), but the volume, criticised in London and Moscow for "sectarianism", was soon withdrawn (Kevin Morgan, "The Archives of the British Communist Party: A Historical Overview", *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 7, no. 3, 1996, pp.404-421, esp. 406-407. [Back to the text](#)

(5) RGASPI, 531/1/39:40. [Back to the text](#)

(6) RGASPI, 531/1/39:14,40. [Back to the text](#)

(7) Margaret McCarthy, *Generation in Revolt* (London 1953), p.115. [Back to the text](#)

(8) RGASPI, 17/98/750:1-3. [Back to the text](#)

(9) RGASPI, 531/1/171:27. [Back to the text](#)

(10) RGASPI, 531/1/171:27-28. [Back to the text](#)

(11) RGASPI, 531/1/171:31. [Back to the text](#)

(12) RGASPI, 531/1/171:34-35. No allowance was foreseen for the families of the British aspirants either, who were due to enrol at the school for the academic year 1937-38 but did not arrive (RGASPI, 495/4/245:171; 531/1/128:11). [Back to the text](#)

(13) PRO, HW 17/19, Radio Telegram London-Moscow (to Kerrigan), 21 October 1935. [Back to the text](#)

(14) PRO, HW 17/21, Radio Telegram Moscow-London, 9 March and 30 April 1936. [Back to the text](#)

- (15) PRO, HW 17/21, Radio Telegram London-Moscow, 14 March 1936. [Back to the text](#)
- (16) They were, in chronological order: Douglas Springhall, George Aitken, Bert Williams, George Coyle, Jack Roberts, Ernest Torrance, James Bourne, Eric Whalley, Harry Dobson, Walter Tapsell and Bob Cooney (RGASPI, 545/6/89:37). [Back to the text](#)
- (17) RGASPI, 545/6/89:38. [Back to the text](#)
- (18) RGASPI, 545/6/89:37,39. [Back to the text](#)
- (19) RGASPI, 17/98/751:2-6. [Back to the text](#)
- (20) He held this post from December 1936 to February 1937 (RGASPI, 545/6/89:37). [Back to the text](#)
- (21) Alexander Foote, Handbook for Spies (London 1953), p.18. [Back to the text](#)
- (22) Branson, History of the CPGB, 1941-1951, p.73. For an astute critique of Branson's "sanitised" account of the Springhall scandal, see John McIlroy's review essay in Labour History Review, 3(63)1998, pp.361-362. [Back to the text](#)
- (23) Douglas Hyde, I Believed. The Autobiography of a Former British Communist (London 1950), p.139. [Back to the text](#)
- (24) M.R.D. Foot, S.O.E. An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940-1946 (London 1993), p.203. [Back to the text](#)
- (25) Foote, Handbook, pp.14-23. [Back to the text](#)
- (26) Nigel West and Oleg Tsarev, The Crown Jewels. The British Secrets at the Heart of the KGB Archives (London 1998), pp.131-134,182,273. [Back to the text](#)
- (27) Ibid., pp.123-126; RGASPI, 17/98/685:1-3. (28) RGASPI, 17/98/690:6,11,13,14. [Back to the text](#)
- (29) Alexander Orlov, the NKVD "spy-master", recounted how he met a certain "Vernik" in 1934 during a visit to Paris. The shabbily-dressed man before him had previously worked with Orlov in the Berlin offices of the Soviet Trade Delegation, but had defected in the late 1920s. See John Costello and Oleg Tsarev, Deadly Illusions (New York 1993), pp.111-113. [Back to the text](#)
- (30) Hyde, I Believed, pp.138-142. CPGB membership rose from 22,783 in December 1941 to 47,513 in March 1944 (Branson, CPGB, 1941-1951, p.252). [Back to the text](#)
- (31) West and Tsarev, Crown Jewels, p.352. [Back to the text](#)
- (32) ibid., p.154. [Back to the text](#)
- (33) McLeod, Death of Uncle Joe, p.9. According to Monty Johnstone, in the Dimitrov files in RGASPI, now unfortunately closed(again), Danny Gibson is mentioned in correspondence between Dimitrov and Pavel Fitin, the head of Soviet foreign intelligence abroad in the years 1940-46. [Back to the text](#)
- (34) RGASPI, 17/98/780: 1-2. [Back to the text](#)
- (35) RGASPI, 17/98/811:1-2. [Back to the text](#)
- (36) TsAFSBRF, investigation file no.29883 Patrick Breslin, excerpt (9 April 1941) from report of informer no.16178; RGASPI, 17/98/796:3-7. [Back to the text](#)
- (37) For an account of the career of the London-born ECCI courier John Torode, who plied the London-Berlin route in the second half of the 1930s, see John Torode jnr., "Voyage around my comrade father", The Independent(weekend supplement, pp.31-33), 25 November 1989. [Back to the text](#)
- (38) G.M. Adibekov, E.N. Shakhnazarova and K.K. Shirina, Organizatsionnaia struktura Kominterna 1919-1943 (Moscow 1997), pp. 25-26,48,74-76,115-117,159-161,199-201. [Back to the text](#)
- (39) Vladimir Piatnitskii, Zagovor protiv Stalina (Moscow 1998), pp.199-225. [Back to the text](#)
- (40) For details of this re-organisation, see Brigitte Studer, "Die Kominternstruktur nach dem 7.

Weltkongreß. Das Protokoll des Sekretariats des EKKI über die Reorganisierung des EKKI, 2. Oktober 1935", Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung (IWK), 1(1995),pp.25-53. [Back to the text](#)

(41) RGASPI, 531/1/106:71. [Back to the text](#)

(42) RGASPI, 531/1/169:6. [Back to the text](#)

(43) RGASPI, 531/1/106:35. [Back to the text](#)

(44) RGASPI, 531/1/134:3. [Back to the text](#)

(45) RGASPI, 17/98/762:2. [Back to the text](#)

(46) RGASPI, 495/4/306:17,18 (decision of Political Secretariat of ECCL, 3 September 1934).

[Back to the text](#)

(47) PRO, HW 17/19, Radio Telegram Moscow-London, 10 October 1935. [Back to the text](#)

(48) The radio Moscow-London-Moscow telegrams mention the soubriquets "Wilson school" for OMS training and "Lenin school" for ILS trainees. Many of those sent to the "Wilson school" are either not identifiable or nothing is known about them, even when the real name is given. The trio Edward Smith, Jean Hyman and Sydney Fink who arrived in Moscow in late January 1936 were presumably part of the OMS school intake as they do not surface in any Lenin School student rolls (PRO, HW 17/20, Radio Telegram Moscow-London, 24 January 1936). According to the PRO (HW 17/16 to 21) files, other OMS students (real names) from Britain were: Stephens, Ives, Hill, Roche, Nicholls, Hawkins, Tom Robertson, Samson Henry Cohen, Winifred Isabella McKeig and Ann Gray. [Back to the text](#)

(49) RGASPI, 545/6/89:23. [Back to the text](#)

(50) PRO, HW 17/18, Radio Telegram London-Moscow, 18 May 1935. [Back to the text](#)

(51) American passports, including those of dead International Brigade volunteers, were prized by Soviet espionage for the same reasons. See W.G. Krivitsky, I was Stalin's Agent. Edited by Mark Almond (Oxford 1992), p.68. [Back to the text](#)